

# The New Criterion

## Books

March 2008

### A life of allegory

by [Joseph Tartakovsky](#)

On *Shakespeare: The World as Stage* by Bill Bryson.

*Bill Bryson*

Shakespeare: The World as Stage.  
Eminent Lives, 208 pages, \$19.95

Every Shakespeare biography is 5 percent fact and 95 percent conjecture, Bill Bryson recalls being told. He is determined to reverse the figures. The purpose of his 200-page *Shakespeare: The World as Stage*, he explains, “is a simple one: to see how much of Shakespeare we can know, really know, from the record.” He doesn’t have an argument, particularly; instead Bryson aims to relate the facts of Shakespeare’s life as briskly as possible, while acknowledging puzzles, deductions, guesswork, and unsatisfactory explanations where they exist. He is not a scholar but a facile writer and assimilator of information, best known for *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, and he quotes liberally from eminent Shakespeareans like Stanley Wells, Frank Kermode, Sylvan Barnet, and Samuel Schoenbaum. He also conducted interviews with scholars in London’s National Portrait Gallery and National Archives, in Stratford-upon-Avon, and at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C.

Shakespeare biographers, says Bryson, generally indulge in speculation or rely on supposition, even “surrender themselves to their imaginations,” and have done so since the poet Nicholas Rowe inaugurated the genre in 1709; filled with hearsay and rumor, Rowe’s biography offered readers eleven facts, eight of which were wrong. The problem, of course, is that despite centuries of scholarly zeal, we simply don’t know very much about the poet’s life. He was born in Stratford in 1564, received an unusually fine education at King’s New School, married (at eighteen) a twenty-six-year-old Anne Hathaway, and disappeared from history for eight years before resurfacing in London in the late 1580s as a poor, twenty-something father of three; then within less than a quarter-century he wrote thirty-eight plays and a number of poems that forever altered the course of human art. Nearly every precious fact we can claim to know about his life derives from a hundred or so mostly legal and administrative documents. These tell us nothing about his character, tastes, or beliefs. Our notion of his appearance is based on one unreliable portrait and one mediocre engraving. We are uncertain how many plays he wrote (Bryson suspects that two, *Love’s Labour’s Won* and *Cardenio*, may be missing). We don’t even know how best to spell his name—Shakespeare himself spelled it differently in each of his six surviving signatures—but we have no record of his spelling it “Shakespeare.”

“[T]here is nothing—not a scrap, not a mote,” writes Bryson, “that gives any certain insight into Shakespeare’s feelings or beliefs as a private person. We can know only what came out of his work,

never what went into it.” The comedies suggest a playful, romantic soul; the sonnets hint at something darker; other works might show him “courtly, cerebral, metaphysical, melancholic, Machiavellian, neurotic, lighthearted, loving, and much more.” Bryson suppresses his own imaginative impulse, aside from a few lapses, like calling Shakespeare “a man pathologically averse to paying taxes” and of course the obligatory passage on Shakespeare’s possible homosexuality. Yet even when encircling his claims with caveats, Bryson is happy to relate what others have surmised—and surmised on the basis of some of the most devoted scholarship accorded any man. Could it be revealing of Shakespeare’s character that his plays refer to love 2,259 times and hate only 183 times? Or that his will left ten pounds to Stratford’s poor, fivefold the typical legacy for one of his position? Perhaps Shakespeare was a sailor: every one of his plays refers to the sea. Then again, he portrayed a number of vocations—lawyers, kings, doctors, fat knights—supremely well. “Shakespeare led a life of allegory,” wrote Keats, “and his works are the comments on it.”

The best biographies show us not only their subjects but the world in which they moved. Bryson’s picture of Elizabethan life is vivid and engaging. If the problem with writing the life of Shakespeare is a “wealth of text”—884,647 words, by Bryson’s measure—“but a poverty of context,” the next best thing to knowing the details of Shakespeare’s life is to know those of his contemporaries. Bryson tells us that Shakespeare’s formal education, which probably stopped in his fifteenth year, was so rigorously focused that he received training in Latin rhetoric and literature superior to that of a modern classics degree; that he arrived in a London so violent that even poets carried weapons; that all of his poetry was miraculously composed without the aid of tea and coffee, both still unknown; that legal codes were pervasive enough to prescribe that a man of Shakespeare’s income could wear satin but not velvet, and at meals was permitted only two courses, plus soup; that 70 percent of men and 90 percent of women couldn’t sign their name; that theaters were considered so lowbrow that authorities relegated them beyond London’s walls, alongside brothels, prisons, unconsecrated graveyards, and lunatic asylums; that a theater, to prosper against fierce competition, had to draw as many as 2,000 patrons each day—equal to Stratford’s population, or 1 percent of London’s population—about 200 times a year.

Equally striking is Bryson’s London as Shakespeare knew it: a city of 200,000, Europe’s third-largest after Paris and Naples, a noisy bustling cauldron of scribes, soldiers, aristocrats, ecclesiasts, attorneys, vagrants, merchants, craftsmen, barking, stench, struggle, disease, and mud, all jostling amid teetering churches, a crowded Thames, London Bridge’s “grisly bird feeder” of traitors’ heads, booksellers at St. Paul’s (7,000 titles appeared during Elizabeth’s forty-five-year reign; today 4,000 studies are published *annually* on Shakespeare). A Londoner’s life expectancy was less than thirty-five years, which goes far in consoling us for Shakespeare’s death at fifty-two.

The book is full of sharp observations and interesting facts and figures, even if unsourced and occasionally drawn second-hand. The strictly factual approach follows in the tradition of Schoenbaum, the late University of Maryland professor whose *William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life* (1977) remains the gold standard in unspeculative Shakespeare biography. Yet Bryson is even more compact. Part of HarperCollins’s *Eminent Lives* series, “short biographies perfect for an age short on time,” the work is a model of leanness: no table of contents, no index, and narrow text margins; there are also no prints or images, which is regrettable since Bryson devotes lengthy passages to describing the extant sketches of London and its theaters, the representations we have of Shakespeare’s likeness, and the handwritten manuscript pages from the play *Sir Thomas More* that some believe may be in Shakespeare’s own hand.

“With nearly every aspect of his life and character,” says Bryson, Shakespeare is “at once the best known and least known of figures.” He calls this “paradoxical.” Yet there is no paradox. It is precisely because of our lack of biographical detail that we *can* write so much about him. Obscurity permits endless speculation and interpretation: Shakespeare can mean anything to anyone. Imagine,

for instance, on the matter of his alleged Catholicism, that Shakespeare in his will included a single phrase that conclusively revealed his faith. Dozens of volumes now cluttering university bookshelves would instantly disappear; they could never have been written. Nor would we suffer the band of enthusiasts known as the anti-Stratfordians, who endeavor to establish that Shakespeare's works were written by someone other than Shakespeare, usually Francis Bacon, Edward de Vere, or Christopher Marlowe. Bryson's final chapter dismisses them sharply, so sharply, in fact, that one wonders why such an anticlimactic ending was necessary.

Instead, a different sort of paradox is how a biographer like Bryson can call Shakespeare the "most venerated figure of the English language" and then make no attempt to define Shakespeare's greatness, beyond a few remarks about how many words Shakespeare invented or that he was skilled in adapting existing work. The book's compression and purpose led Bryson to dispense almost entirely with any literary discussion of the plays and their poetry; certainly it is refreshing to read a new book on Shakespeare that doesn't mention the name Harold Bloom. Yet it is disconcerting in equal degree to find Samuel Johnson mentioned only in passing, or to read Bryson disparaging the efforts of Dryden and Pope to "improve" Shakespeare while ignoring their tributes. For some reason his discussion of Shakespeare criticism and scholarship focuses on the eccentricities of those who devoted themselves to it. But if Shakespeare's posthumous life is to be considered, it seems odd and frivolous to recount the opinions of anti-Stratfordians like Delia Bacon, J. Thomas Looney, Calvin Hoffman, Dr. Arthur Titherley, and a half-dozen other imperfectly sane and largely forgotten figures, when the opinions of those like Milton, Hazlitt, Coleridge, and A. C. Bradley are ignored. These men had powerful things to say about Shakespeare, and their writings on him are at least as much a part of the story of Shakespeare, as much a part of the "record," as are those of the anti-Stratfordians.

The restraint and brevity of the book, and the abundance of secondary material from which to draw, forced Bryson to select his emphases with strict economy. He has done so successfully, on the whole: facts are rightly chosen and telling, authorities are judiciously cited, and the essential biographical points are made, all while preserving a candid sense of mystery. But even greater than the biographical enigma of Shakespeare is the artistic one, the question of how one poet seized the world's imagination, from the illiterates of his day to the luminaries of successive ages, whose genius is at once so incomprehensible and so profound that he was not merely a genius in himself but the cause of genius in others. This, after all, is why we read biographies of William Shakespeare and why they will continue to be written.

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This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 26 March 2008, on page 67

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